The Anglican Polity and the Politics of the Common Good

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1. Secularisation and the post-liberal politics

If Britain has become more secularised over the past century or so, it has to do with two distinct yet complementary developments: first, the expansion of both state and market in hitherto autonomous, more mutually governed areas (including education, health, welfare, the family, etc.).[1] Second, the retreat of the Church from its traditional involvement in these social, charitable, education and cultural activities.[2] Taken together, they help explain why the economy has been progressively disembedded from society and interpersonal relationships have been subsumed under either bureaucratic processes or commercial transactions (or indeed both at once).

Crucially, state and market have increasingly converged and even colluded at the expense of civil society, i.e. the 'complex space' of intermediary institutions such as free hospitals, friendly societies, manufacturing and trading guilds or universities whose autonomy is upheld by the Church.[3] The global 'market-state' has subordinated the sanctity of life, land and labour to abstract values and standards, reducing the dignity of the person to 'bare individuality' and the shared quest for the common good to the individual pursuit of either utility or happiness.

Linked to the advance of secularism is the twin triumph of social-cultural and economic-political liberalism since the 1960s, which has coincided with the de-christianisation of Britain.[4] Decades of liberalisation have certainly provided greater opportunities for many and afforded some protection against the worst transgressions upon the liberty of some by the liberty of others, especially given the growing disagreement about substantive notions of justice and the good life.

However, socio-economic liberalism has also eroded the social bonds and civic ties on which vibrant democracies and market economies ultimately depend for trust and cooperation. Paradoxically, the two liberalisms have engendered a society that is simultaneous more interdependent and more atomised – tied to global finance that undermines the real economy

[1] Polanyi, K. (2001 [orig. pub. 1944]) *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Beacon Press.
[2] Prochaska, F. (2008) *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit*, Oxford University Press.
[3] Milbank, J. (1997) "On Complex Space", in *idem*., *The Word Made Strange. Theology, Language, Culture* Blackwell, pp. 268-92.
[4] Brown, C. (2009) *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*, Routledge, and Bruce, S. (2001) "Christianity in Britain R.I.P", *Sociology of Religion*, 62(2), pp. 191-203. Against such and similar accounts, we contend that Britain remains a vestigially Christian polity. See main text, section 2 and 3.

and further fragments the United Kingdom. Following the global crash in 2008, we are left with a broken economy *and* a broken society.

Five years later, British politics has returned to the old orthodoxies, notably the secular liberalism of both left and right and the collusive convergence of state and market at the expense of civil society. Among the few exceptions are ideas and movements such as 'Red Tory' and 'Blue Labour' that have challenged the secular liberal consensus. Such paradoxical combinations are characteristic of the new post-liberal politics, which seeks to combine greater economic justice with an emphasis on interpersonal relationships, supportive of family loyalty without wanting to decree in what a 'real' family should consist.

But as both Red Tory and Blue Labour struggle to gain traction with the mainstream of the Conservative and the Labour party or indeed with the public at large, the role of the Church in shaping a politics of the common good is increasingly coming to the fore. Catholic Social Thought has provided much inspiration to the post-liberal thinking of Blue Labour in particular, both in terms of rejecting the false opposition between state collectivisation and market commodification and in relation to concrete policy alternatives such as the 'living wage', caps on usurious interest rates, proper workers' representation in firms, a vocational economy as well as robust regional banks constrained to lend within specific sectors and counties or cities, as Maurice Glasman has advocated.[5]

As the established Church with its unique parochial system, the Church of England is exceptionally well positioned to offer courageous leadership and translate perennial principles into transformative practices. Far from being a mere 'super-NGO' or the poster-institution and moral conscience of civil society, the Church of England is a polity in her own right that co-constitutes together with Parliament the shared public realm under the aegis of the monarchy. In this manner, the established Church has a particular duty to promote a sense of individual virtue and public honour on which a society governed by reciprocity or gift-exchange depends. The Church of England is indispensable to a new politics of the common good beyond the liberalism of both left and right that underpins the global 'market-state'.

2. The Anglican Polity

In many people's eyes the Church of England represents both a confused theological

[5] Maurice Glasman is an academic at London Metropolitan University where he directs the Faith and Citizenship Programme. For his services to community organising as part of a decade-long involvement in London Citizens (an umbrella association that brings together over 150 religious and non-religious groups), he was nominated for a life peerage by the Labour leader Ed Miliband in 2010. Lord Glasman is the founding father of 'Blue Labour', a movement that seeks to reconnect the Labour Party to its roots in the cooperative movement and in the Christian churches, committed to forging ties with all religious communities in the quest for the common good.

compromise between Protestantism and Catholicism and an excessive complicity with the secular state. Taken together, these two characteristics would seem to undermine the Church's ability to offer coherent principles and transformative practices to contemporary society.

Yet neither of these clichés is accurate, whether in the past or at present. On the contrary, Anglican theology can be characterised by the radical degree to which it insists on the combination of the human and the divine in the event of the Incarnation: an emphasis that derives both from the Protestant reformer William Tyndale (echoing the medieval tradition of Wycliffe) and the later more 'Catholicising' theologian Richard Hooker – arguably the founding father of Anglican theology.[6]

This stress means, for Anglicanism, that when the human heart expands upwards towards God, it must also expand outwards towards nature, the neighbour and society at large. One finds such a notion of 'double dilation' – vertical and horizontal – in writers, theologians and activists as diverse as Edmund Spenser, Lancelot Andrewes, Hooker, Benjamin Whichcote, Ralph Cudworth, Thomas Vaughan, Thomas Traherne, John Wesley, John Norris, Arthur Collier and William Wilberforce. Later in the 19th century the same impulse gave rise in the High and Broad Church tendencies to a social 'incarnationalism', which at its best did not neglect the Evangelical emphasis on repentance and atonement.

However, the same stress has not just meant that ethical involvement should accompany piety. It has also meant an acute and visionary tendency to see the sacred in the ordinary, the way to the infinite through the finite. Indeed, nothing concerning our passing through this world is irrelevant to our attaining the things eternal, as the Anglican prayer for God's mercy so well puts it:

> O God, the protector of all that trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy; Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy; that, thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal.

Thus Anglicans have characteristically looked for God in nature, in history, in art and in society as well as in Scripture and liturgy. Anglicanism is 'pan-sacramental' in a way that cannot be adequately grasped by any notion of a *via media*.

All this is of crucial relevance to the social involvement of the Church of England today. For it means that Anglicans at their best tend to go out from themselves without in anyway surrendering their own integrity or their own prime service of God. For this 'going out' is seen as being paradoxically at one with 'going inwards and upwards'. In this way, organised

[6] Williams, R. (2004), "William Tyndale (c1494-1536): the Christian Society", "Richard Hooker (1554-1600): Contemplative Pragmatism" and "Richard Hooker (1554-1600): Philosopher, Anglican, Contemporary", in *idem*., *Anglican Identities*, Darton, Longman & Todd, pp. 9-23, pp. 24-39 and pp. 40-56.

social and civic involvement is not for Anglicans a distraction from more spiritual concerns, but belongs intimately to them. 'Mission' is understood as building up the life of the Kingdom on earth, and that involves beauty, good fellowship and human flourishing as much as it involves a life of prayer, worship and sacrifice. Anglicans have never forgotten the ancient Christian and medieval view that the Church is in itself a fully-fledged 'polity' – a social and political reality whose ambitions towards reconciliation and harmony exceed those of an law-governed state or a market dominated by commercial exchange.

It is for this reason that one should not conceive of Anglican social involvement as either sporadic charity or as saving the Government care and expense in the field of welfare. To the contrary, this involvement lies at the centre of Church activity as such. The unique role of a church body is rather that it is well-placed to coordinate many diverse voluntary activities done by people of many faiths and none, in such a way as not to lose hold of its interpersonal and reciprocal character.

Yet at the same time, the unique role of an established church is that it is able also to link these activities with the valid aspects of state involvement. And here it is not so much that the Church is able to assist the state, as rather that the Church and all faith groups can hope to infuse institutional arrangements of both a bureaucratic and market kind with a more human and mutualist spirit. For Anglicans as for other Christians, social action is to perpetuate the double work of incarnation of spirit in matter, and the work of spiritualising the material. A work both of sacrificial and reconciliatory healing and of joyful, celebratory participation in the continuing divine act of creation.

Moreover, establishment means that the Church qualifies the authority of the state as less than final and absolute. The role of the established church is neither to sanctify the state nor to supplant the government but rather to transform public institutions in the direction of both individual virtue and public honour. At their best, both Church and state can work together for the dignity of the person, human flourishing and the public common good.

As a polity in her own right, the Church of England's social, charitable, educational and cultural involvement is not simply a religious imperative. It is also a unique contribution to society and a source for great good to the whole nation – to people of all faiths and none. For the Church is the only institution that provides assistance universally and unconditionally. Ecclesial help is not a cover for 'bible-bashing' proselytism but instead embodies the Christian idea of gift-exchange – gifts born of both faith and works, offered in love, and given in the hope that they might encourage a more giving society.

3. On the Church of England's social action and civic role

Contemporary critics of establishment tend to focus on the decline of congregational attendance and similar measures in order to dispute Anglicanism's claim to established status. Linked to this is the objection (shared by certain Anglicans, some religious groups and many secular voices) to the perceived privileges that establishment unfairly grants to the Church of England. Depending on the perspective, this either gives Anglicanism undue influence in public debates or undercuts critical interventions. Either way, it apparently prevents a robust engagement between representatives of state and church and discriminates against other perspectives that are variously more religious or more secular.

However, none of these objections stand up to serious scrutiny. First of all, establishment uphold both religious freedom and secular politics. For the Church can speak truth to power and demonstrate how the state is ultimately provisional and answerable to higher principles, not final or absolute. An established church upholds a free space wherein people of all faiths and none can exercise their freedom of expression and of conscience.

Secondly, compared with the heyday of the secularisation thesis, faith is nowadays more not less important in the public sphere and the life of the nation. Anglican establishment provides a constitutional recognition that England is and remains a vestigially Christian polity. Universal values such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law do not only have their historical roots in the Christian fusion of Greco-Roman philosophy with biblical revelation but also require practices of individual virtue and public honour that the Church of England promotes at all levels of society across the realm – through education, welfare and all the Anglican involvement in social and charitable activities.

Thirdly and crucially, crude paradigms of religiosity in terms of congregational attendance fail to capture the far more complex realities of Christian life in Britain today. For Christianity is lived in diverse ways through the Church yet often outside the formal, institutional church.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the established church is absolutely central to this. Christians as well as people of other faiths and none experience the realities of Anglican culture by participating in various forms of communal interaction that are often beyond the more clearly quantifiable 'bums on pews' every Sunday morning.

Key to this is the social and civic action promoted by the majority of churches, above all the Church of England through its unique parochial system – whether more social events such as youth groups, dinners for the elderly, mums and toddlers groups and coffee mornings or economic and welfare services like food-banks, homeless shelters, debt counselling, credit

unions and health services.[7] In events such as these, people from many different backgrounds come together and the Church can reach a greater diversity of persons and groups than in virtually any other activity or form of human association – except perhaps certain popular sports like football.

For many communities, where in recent years places like pubs, working clubs and community halls have been closed down, the Church and its connected buildings provide the only visible focal point in which people can come together. As such, many events organised through churches involve persons of other faiths and of no faith, broadening the diversity achieved through the focal point. As the established church, the Church of England has a unique position in the communal life of the country today, often filling the gaps left by both state and market. Since it provides help universally and unconditionally, the Church makes a distinct and invaluable contribution to society as a whole.

In practical terms it is the Anglican establishment which today uniquely sustains in Britain a parish system that structures all of local life in diverse ways.[8] This provides a platform for a future great extension of such involvement by reaching out into, and helping to coordinate, the spheres of education, welfare, health, business and finance. Such and similar areas call for a new civil 'mutualisation' outside the control of either the centralised bureaucratic state or the profit-seeking free market, which only became dominant when the Church started to retreat from its civil role and social action.[9]

And it is this extension which will also restore the Church's spiritual mission. In recent decades this has failed largely because of the mistaken and even craven retreat of the Church from social, charitable, educational and cultural involvement. Frank Prochaska has written of Christianity wholly ceding its social mission to the state that 'the bishops blew out the candles to see better in the dark'.[10] In consequence of this retreat, many people in Britain now see little or no connection between the Church's mission and the main spheres of public life in which they are involved. Because most people think in practical, concrete terms (and rightly so), Christianity is not comprehensible to them unless they see its effects in practice and through vivid, concrete instantiations. That is why the Church needs to enhance its involvement in society and offer new institutions and practices that promote the common

[7] For the most comprehensive and up-to-date overview, see the recently published report by The ResPublica Trust, "Holistic Mission: Social action and the Church of England", written by James Noyes and Phillip Blond, and edited by Caroline Julian, available online at http://www.respublica.org.uk/documents/mfp_ResPublica%20-%20Holistic%20Mission%20-%20FULL%20REPORT%20-%2010July2013.pdf See Caroline Julian and James Noyes, 'Institutional Failure and Anglicanism', this issue.

[8] Davison, A. and Milbank, A. (2010) *For the Parish: a Critique of Fresh Expressions*, SCM.

[9] In addition to Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain*, see also Beito, D. T. (2000) *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State. Fraternal Societies, 1890–1967*, The University of North Carolina Press.

[10] Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain*, p. 152.

good.

4. The Church of England and the Politics of the Common Good

Greater Church of England involvement in society is indispensable to the success of a post-liberal politics. The fate of the Big Society project demonstrates the crucial role of religion, which is not so much to complement existing processes but rather to transform the secular outlook in the direction of transcendent finalities that are embodied in immanent practices of social reciprocity or gift-exchange.[11] This means transforming the secular emphasis away from individual self-interest and collective power towards the dignity of the person, human flourishing and the common good.

Concretely, there are two ways in which the Church of England can seek to achieve this. First of all, by cooperating with government (both central and local) and other stakeholders on shared projects, e.g. the Near Neighbours programme where the Department for Communities and Local Government works with the Church Urban Fund and its parish network to build stronger communities. However, as the ResPublica report on 'Holistic Mission' indicates, there are a number of obstacles. These include, first, the realities of fiscal austerity; second, suspicion on the part of certain people in local government towards formal Church involvement in the provision of welfare and other services; third, inadequate ecclesial structures, e.g. the Church's inability to bid for public tenders. Despite such and similar concerns over funding and coordination, there is a overriding culture of openness and goodwill between church organisations, local authorities and other parties, which bodes well for future cooperation. If both the Church of England and government implement the recommendations as set out in the ResPublica report, then this could permanently change the way the Church's social action transforms state welfare and other public services.

But the Church should not merely respond to existing policy initiatives and work within the structure of both state and market. The second – and much more transformative – way for the Church to shape the new post-liberal politics is by leading the debate and brokering a new settlement that makes gift-exchange or reciprocity the ultimate principle to govern *both* the economy and politics. Concretely, this means tackling the most acute problems that blight families and communities across the land.

The first such problem is personal and household debt, which provides an all-too-fertile ground for usurious lending practices – whether by payday loan companies such as Wonga, Ramsdens and the Money Shop or large parts of the retail banking system. The Church of

[11] See Pabst, A. (2010), "The Big Society needs religion", *The Guardian* 21 July 2010, available online at http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/jul/21/religion-bigsociety-mutualism-reciprocity

England is uniquely positioned to lead on this issue because it combines a compelling critique of immoral behaviour with practical alternatives, including the possible use of Church buildings to operate new credit unions. The Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby has shown the way by speaking out against usury and suggesting that the Church of England – with its unique parochial system and a physical presence in 16,000 communities – has the potential to help build an alternative banking network by supporting the growth of credit unions. In a personal letter to all clergy on the occasion of the International Credit Union Day on 17th October 2013, Welby wrote that

> A large and growing number of people rely on short-term loans at very high interest rates to make ends meet, and can easily end up in a crippling spiral of debt. One million families are taking out payday loans every month as they struggle with rising living costs. I have seen this myself in the communities where I have lived and worked, and it is devastating. But people often have little choice, especially in deprived areas of the country.
>
> Our faith in Christ calls us to love the poor and vulnerable with our actions. That is why churches must be actively involved in supporting the development of real lending alternatives such as credit unions. That is not an optional activity, but a fundamental part of our witness and service to God's people.
>
> We must help credit unions to become bigger, better known and easier to access if we want them to compete effectively with high interest lenders. We have a unique opportunity to make a difference. We can begin simply by saving some money with our local credit union, using their services and encouraging others to do the same. Some churches are already doing this, so we known the difference it can make to the local community.[12]

Church leadership on this question would help achieve two things. It would make a huge difference to all those who stand to benefit from a new trust platform for lending and borrowing. Using church buildings and perhaps even church assets to underwrite new peer-to-peer lending would also inject some badly needed competition into a banking sector that is characterised by monopoly, cartels and captive relationships that exploit people in dire need of cash – not 'free-market' competitive prices and personal choice. The other effect would be both symbolic and real, standing up to secular finance capitalism and encouraging all those who are working for an alternative banking system, including caps on interest rates (e.g. 20%, as in Germany where this cap has not led to more illegal loan sharks), ideas to create regional investment banks or local building societies (constrained to lend within a city or county), as Maurice Glasman has suggested.[13]

[12] http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1854879/coe_a5_4pp_leaflet_final.pdf
[13] See Glasman, M. (2013), "Labour should join Justin Welby's war on Wonga", *The Guardian* 26 July 2013, available online at http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jul/25/justin-welby-war-on-wonga

A second pressing problem is the persistence of unjust wages and unfair prices, which lock the poor and increasingly the 'squeezed middle' into a vicious circle of debt and demoralisation. Except for liberal professions, the wages in public and also many private sector jobs have either gone up by less than the costs of living or have fallen in real terms. Yet at the same time, the pay of chief executives and the top management in both the public and the private sector has grown exponentially, making the UK one of the most unequal countries in terms of both income and asset. The Church of England can support various campaigns in favour of the 'living wage', which over time has a positive effect on productivity (via job satisfaction, innovation and greater 'social capital') and therefore makes both ethical and economic sense.

Moreover, the Church of England – through its involvement in social, educational, charitable and economic activities – has both moral authority and real clout in promoting just prices, just wages and a more corporatist political role for guilds and other professional associations. By making use of church buildings and church work with other organisations, diocesan and parish churches can take a stand and support a more virtuous cycle of proper pay, productivity, innovation and more mutually beneficial economic outcomes. This would also provide the basis for corporate governance reforms (strengthening workers' representation in firms) and pluralising economic governance by including professional associations in policy- and decision-making (e.g. by renewing and extending guild halls).

With the right ideas and leadership at different levels, the Church of England can shape the new post-liberal politics in the direction of human flourishing and the common good. Neither state regulation nor 'free market' competition will by itself produce a more virtuous economy. There is no necessary trade-off between greater efficiency and greater equality. On the contrary, the pursuit of longer-term stable and steadily augmenting profit requires, for strict business reasons, an attention to mutual benefit. There is thus both an ethical *and* an economic case for moral markets. In large part thanks to its established status, the Church embodies a distinct polity and shows how both state and market are ultimately provisional. Through its unique parochial system, the Church is more local, more personal and more holistic in its approach to human needs than either central bureaucracy or profit-seeking enterprise. By making the Church (and other religious communities) central to the public and the private sector, the new post-liberal politics transform both the economy and society.

Crucially, the new post-liberal politics seeks to fuse greater economic justice with social reciprocity by promoting both individual virtue and public honour. There is enormous potential in partnering with parishes, dioceses and church organising in rejecting the double

liberal impersonalism of economic contract between strangers, and individual entitlement in relation to the bureaucratic machine. Instead of the combination of commercial contract without gift, plus the unilateral gift from nowhere that is state welfare, we propose gift-exchange or reciprocity as the ultimate principle to govern *both* the economic and the political realms.

6. Conclusion

This essay has argued in favour of Anglican establishment and a radical renewal of the Church's social action and civic role. First of all, Church establishment is indispensable to the political and social life of the country as a whole because it combines a secular politics with real religious freedom which together uphold the principles of liberality upon which both a vibrant democracy and a functioning market economy depend. Secondly, the established Church is a polity in its own right that can speak truth to power and transform both the state and the market in accordance with perennial principles such as reciprocity, solidarity and subsidiarity.

Third, the Church is exceptionally well positioned to take the lead on rooting out usurious practices and talking the vicious circle of debt and demoralisation by promoting the creation of credit unions and new forms of peer-to-peer lending that make creative use of the Church's unique parochial system. Thus, the question is not primarily about a more religious *versus* a more secular state but rather about a renewed Anglican settlement (in cooperation with the other Christian denominations and faith communities) or an alternative where the extremes of aggressive secularism and religious fundamentalism will crowd out the radical centre – a politics of the common good that promotes individual virtue and public honour.